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ABSTRACT

The Program of Research and Evaluation for Public Schools (PREPS) model is unique because all research and evaluation activities are conceived, conducted, and controlled by the local public schools, members of the consortium. It is a delivery system designed to improve school effectiveness. PREPS was developed as a result of the demand for school accountability. Public school superintendents sought the assistance of the College of Education (COE) at Mississippi State University (MSU) to embark on a joint venture to provide sound data for making curricular changes. PREPS was designed to provide research and evaluation services to member schools. The consortium became an independent incorporated entity in 1984, capable of contracting as PREPS, Inc. The model has stressed utilization and application of evaluation results. The criteria for judging an evaluation model include practicality; manipulable components; economy of use; easily communicable components; comprehensiveness; synergism; phase flexibility; allowance of differential resource investment in components; recognition of influence on balance of system caused by the change process; flexible and versatile application to different organizational structures; provisions for evaluation, effectiveness, and impact assessment of change; and recognition of the humanity of participants. The interaction of MSU/COE and public schools has been mutually beneficial. (DWH)

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Alternative Model

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INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS: AN INTERACTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a unique approach to providing assistance in acquiring decision-making data by Mississippi public schools for use in curricula revision and school reform. Originated by public school personnel who sought the assistance of an institution of higher education, the Program of Research and Evaluation for Public Schools (PREPS) model is unique in that all activities are conceived, conducted, and controlled by the local public schools that are members of the consortium. This "locus of control" expedites the change process since all activities are locally initiated. Intrinsic motivation to make changes also is a mainstay of the PREPS model.

The purpose of this paper is to address the question: Why would an institution of higher education (IHE) want to become involved in a nontraditional consortium like PREPS (Program of Research and Evaluation in Public Schools)? The first inclination is to say, "Primarily because PREPS really is nontraditional; it does not fit the stereotypic image of traditional consortia or any other entities that purport to interact with public schools in a service capacity." While this statement does not fully answer the question, it does tend to set the tone for the rest of this paper; i.e., the uncommon becomes commonplace.

However, in order to be precise about higher education-public school interaction in the PREPS instance, it seems most appropriate to take a brief look at what PREPS is, how it began, the antecedents that led to its inception, possibly a few problems it has encountered along the way, and how at least one college of education and its university parent institution have benefited from association with the consortium while simultaneously delivering services in support of it. In scanning this paper, the reader is invited at the outset to be alert to possible changing roles, images, and the like, in both the IHE and in the public school.

The PREPS Concept. PREPS is not the brainchild of any single individual; the best thinking of many knowledgeable people have gone into its formulation, its implementation, and its evolution into what it is today. Several long-term national and state trends led up to the inception of PREPS. For most of the time in our country's history, most American citizens believed that education led to employment, employment led to a better lifestyle, and a better lifestyle produced a better citizen.

Another way of saying this is that employment has remained the solution of choice for all Americans. But during the 1960's and early 1970's, faith in the education, employment, and training programs that were designed to redress many of these problems waned considerably. The demand by school boards and citizens for accountability in schools was probably the most influential factor that gave rise to PREPS. Directly related to accountability was the continued growth in the late 1960's and early 1970's of the general public opinion trend of disenchantment with the public school system as well as with many of our other social institutions. Educational research itself was not faring very well at the time either. The U.S. General Accounting Office reported to the U.S. Congress in 1973 that, "More than $200 million in educational research has produced little evidence of significant impact in classrooms." Simultaneously with these trends, there was an emerging recognition that education might have great potential as an economic development tool, especially as an attractant to new industry. This idea had great appeal for states that remained largely unindustrialized. What seemed to be needed was improved institutional capacity to recognize the need for and become proactive in directing change in the schools.

In the early 1970's these and other related trends were common topics that were being discussed in all meetings of professional educators who had long recognized the dire need for sound data which could serve as the basis for improving the public education system, especially the curriculum component of the system. The ground swell continued until the latter part of 1975 when several school superintendents approached the College of Education (COE) at Mississippi State University (MSU) to determine if a joint venture could be embarked upon that would provide sound data for

making curricular changes. Numerous discussions were held with many school administrators who were operating in various capacities at different educational levels across the state. The resulting consensus was that building a base of sound decision-making data was, and still is, the first priority of all educational personnel who are involved in improving educational practice. MSU was asked to become a partner in this venture because of its strong commitment to service --- in addition to its commitments to research and teaching --- as a land grant institution.

Throughout the Spring and Summer of 1976, efforts were exerted to recruit all of Mississippi's 153 school districts into PREPS and to familiarize them with its purpose and mission. By July, 1976, ten school districts had tentatively committed themselves to membership in the consortium. Convincing some school superintendents of the potential payoff for joining PREPS was not easy. Most were skeptical of the promised research results because their perception of the type of research that would be conducted through PREPS would, in all probability, be the same as that which they had experienced while completing doctoral dissertations. With verbal guarantees that such would not necessarily be the case, the first ten schools signed memoranda of agreement and PREPS became a functional consortium of public schools working cooperatively and collaboratively with the MSU/COE. Membership grew steadily from 10 in 1976 to 31 in 1984. The 31 public school districts that are currently members of the consortium comprise about one-fifth of the 153 school districts in Mississippi. These 31 school districts contain about 40% of the total state enrollment of public school students.

The major purpose of PREPS is to provide research and evaluation services to its member schools at a cost that they can afford, the idea

being that costs can be reduced by doing things collectively instead of individually by each school. Since 1976, PREPS has operated as separate school districts contracting individually with Mississippi State University. This year, 1984, the consortium will become an independent incorporated entity, capable of contracting as PREPS, Inc., with whomever and for whatever purposes it desires. Its basic mission of school practice improvement will remain the same, but its activities will be greatly expanded.

The Nature of PREPS Activities. Research for school reform certainly is not unique to Mississippi. Most progressive countries and states throughout the world recognize that research plays a pivotal role in school reform. As long ago as 1940, Sweden appointed a special commission to study educational reform and the place of research in reform. Again in 1946, Sweden appointed a second commission to discover what research could do to provide an extended knowledge base for educational reform proposals. Similar movements and activities focusing on school reform have occurred periodically since that time in Sweden, Germany, and the United States. And, in like manner, several states have undertaken school reform activities, Mississippi being among them. Most knowledgeable educators in Mississippi will agree that PREPS played an important role in the passage by the Mississippi Legislature of the Education Reform Act of 1982.

Criticisms of educational research, especially basic research, in the U.S. are long-standing. In 1950 Isaac Kandel recorded his doubts of the extent to which the mass of material reviewed in the first Encyclopedia of Educational Research would lead to improvement in educational practice and reform. Others have used terms like "trivial," "irrelevant to classroom practice," and "inconsequential" to describe educational research that was

conducted "seemingly unaware of where the crucial problems lie" (J.Myrar Atkin, Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 1967-68, No. 5, 338-45).

Educational research today seems alive and well, but its nature is largely misunderstood. There are no dramatic breakthroughs as in medicine or engineering. Accumulation of a body of educational research knowledge has been a slow process; hence, the general citizenry knows little about the potential benefits of sound educational research. But, the demand for accountability changed all this.

Some of the same trends that finally gave impetus to PREPS had earlier also pointed to the need for revamping and redirecting educational research in the U.S. The creation of the National Institute of Education to supplement the regional education laboratories and the educational research and development centers seems to have been the culmination of many of these forces. And, even with perennially inadequate funding for research, NIE still can point with justifiable pride to many successes since its inception.

But, even with all this flurry of activity in educational research at the national and regional levels, there seems always to have been inordinately slow growth and emphasis in educational research at the state and local levels. Similar patterns of slow growth, or no growth, have characterized research at most teacher education colleges and schools. For the most part, educational research over a long period of time was conducted chiefly by social scientists who were expected to provide an extended knowledge base for educational practice and policy. This was expected, it seems, primarily because of an "interventionist ideology characteristic of the welfare state."

Gradually, the question was formulated: "If learning is supposed to be the most important product of our schools, then why is educational research not more concerned with the instruction of students?" With this question in mind, it appears that the past few years have seen a remarkable increase in carrying on relevant and effective research in the instructional arena. Research on results of schooling is now possible because most teachers now specify what their students are supposed to be learning. This has not always been the case. When teachers did not specify what the students should be learning, then the process of teaching was always more important than the results of teaching (student learning). Similarly, educational research, until recently, was concentrated on the process of education rather than on the results of education, and on the process of the research (procedures) rather than on the results of research. As a result, according to scientists in other disciplines, educational research became a non-science because of its emphasis on man-made phenomena, such as teaching methods, teaching media, various teaching environments, and the like. Similarly, the emphasis on teaching rather than on learning made the traditional teacher's role an art form rather than a science. Teacher education colleges and schools suffered from the same orientation problems.

The upshot of all this is that if the teacher does not facilitate measurable learning, then the evaluation of educational programs is next to impossible, with the exception of gathering a few data on the process of teaching. And, because universities, colleges, and schools of education have traditionally emphasized process of teaching to the exclusion of results of teaching, most of them have labored under the misconception that they could not meet the immediate demands of educational practitioners;

hence, they labored under the mistaken impression that they did not have contributions to make to school reform.

PREPS has radically changed this viewpoint, at least in Mississippi. Since the inception of PREPS in 1976, it has been demonstrated time and time again that a dedicated college of education --- given appropriate resources, commitment, and staff expertise --- can have a major impact on educational reform. The key seems to have been that, through the urging of some public school districts, the IHE's educational research orientation changed from that of process of teaching to results of teaching. This meant a major emphasis was placed on evaluation research by PREPS. And this is probably the major reason why the MSU/COE became eagerly involved with the PREPS consortium.

Growth of interest in and reliance on evaluation research over the past few years has increased phenomenally. Local school boards have expressed urgent need for accountability evaluations. Requests have grown for technical assistance in developing evaluation designs and for training persons in evaluation skills within local school districts. Certain federal education acts require evaluations of programs that are funded through them. Most federal education programs require that a percentage of the budget of specially funded projects be set aside for evaluation. For a few years before the inception of PREPS in 1976, surveys of the needs of public schools in Mississippi revealed that educational program evaluation was the topic above all others about which further information was needed.

Interest in education program evaluation also has been manifested in the numbers of education personnel who attend and participate in training and orientation programs, seminars, meetings, and workshops in evaluation. PREPS in 1976 had 10 school districts as members. That year, each district

sent one or two persons to the first annual workshop on evaluation strategies/methods. Since then, attendance has increased geometrically with each school sending as many as 10 teachers to a given training session. PREPS now holds more than one workshop each year, frequently dividing the sessions for beginner and advanced groups. More than 1,000 teachers and administrators in Mississippi have attended evaluation, test development, or microcomputer workshops sponsored by PREPS. The major impact has been that research and evaluation technologies in education have been lifted up and made more visible to others in the field of education, to the legislature, to those in other governmental agencies, and to the public at large.

In fields other than education, evaluation has been met with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Newcomers to a field view evaluation as having great potential for assuring mission accomplishment, but many old-timers are reluctant to spend time learning new techniques for utilization of evaluation findings that will further reform, renewal, and revision. This viewpoint of evaluation also is held by too many persons in education. Indeed, some educators view evaluation merely as a current fad. The correct view of evaluation is that it should illuminate problems and issues rather than merely adjudicate worth of a program as an evaluator sees it.

Evaluation research in the minds of some educational researchers is not appealing. In actuality, however, this is a myth. Apparently the results of evaluation research, according to some observers, are not as "publishable" as the results from more theoretically oriented research. Hence, some educational researchers --- especially new persons who are just entering the field and who are concerned with getting off on the right foot toward a lifetime career --- seem to be reluctant to enter the field of

evaluation research. Upon entering a traditional educational research environment, according to the myth, the researcher hopes to gain wide respect through one's many publications in his/her particular theoretical specialty. The researcher's expectations are that the research studies will have theoretical relevance; the studies will accommodate the researcher's creative concepts. On the other hand, if the researcher enters upon work that is heavily evaluation oriented, so the myth goes, the researcher expects the studies to deal largely with ungeneralizable matters, which are directed by policy-makers who administer schools, not by the researcher's own creative instincts. To follow the myth further, the theoretical researcher could expect to receive accolades and recognition from colleagues. But, if the researcher has entered the area of evaluation and reports subsequent evaluation findings, the researcher is apt to draw criticism of the methodology, the findings, the cause-effect linkages, and sometimes even the researcher's personality. (Come to think about it, this may not be a myth after all, especially for those who have faced the critics' gun!)

But PREPS has helped to demythologize the utilitarian value of educational evaluation research. The PREPS model from the beginning has stressed utilization and application of evaluation results. PREPS has stressed that a time lag that is too long from origin to application of evaluation results may nullify the best of efforts. Hence, the PREPS model encompasses a change in consultant role for its staff members both at the IHE and at the local school level because it is difficult for planned change (reform) to be carried out without evaluation and vice versa.

As can be seen from this very brief discussion of its model components, PREPS has drawn upon several bodies of theory, especially that

of change or diffusion theory. Much of the work on change has focused on the generation of sound information and its effective communication to an operating system for use in building problem-solving capacity. In performance of its role, PREPS has found that it is necessary to provide support for curricular change, and thus reform, at the teacher level, the school level, the school district level, the school/community level, and the state department/legislature level. PREPS --- possibly unwittingly --- just may have discovered why education in Mississippi has not changed as rapidly as it has in some other states. Until just recently, Mississippi's education system was focused on problem-oriented change --- "identify a problem and it's half solved," so the saying goes. But in the past few years, there has emerged an emphasis on growth-oriented change, the idea being that apparently education has potential as an economic development tool and as a major factor in general community growth and welfare. Motivation for change exists in many forms, such as recognition of the need for increased self-renewal capacity and for growth. Or, there may be an innate desire for change itself or for creative expression. These forces perhaps account for as much or more change in schools than does problem identification; and problem-oriented change is seldom as effective as growth-oriented change.

"Locus of control" is another concept that has influenced PREPS activities. All decisions as to PREPS research and evaluation priorities rest with the local school district. With help from the PREPS staff at the MSU/COE, local school personnel identify and describe the curricular programs, projects, or problems that need researching or evaluating. A research design is drawn up and scheduled for implementation. All decisions are approved by the local school superintendent, who also serves

as a member of the PREPS Advisory Council. The schedule for conducting a study is largely determined by the local school staff, as is the time for summarizing and reporting of results. The PREPS Advisory Council determines policy concerning membership fees, annual statewide studies, and priorities for PREPS activities such as microcomputer applications, test item banking, etc. Interaction with local teachers and administrators provides the "locus of control" that is necessary for the success of PREPS. MSU/COE staff members who work with PREPS schools assume the role of a local school district staff member in carrying out their duties. In essence, this is tantamount to a local school staff having on-call an entire IHE staff as an ancillary cadre of specialists whom they can call by telephone, or have them visit their school, or they can come to the campus for consultation.

Assurance of this kind of access to extra-school assistance is a key component of the PREPS model. And, it is evident that it has changed the traditional research role of the MSU/COE. Such close association/ interaction is beneficial to school renewal capacity building, since most problems experienced in local school districts are very complex and are not subject to simplistic solutions. Also, continuity of availability of technical assistance to a school enhances depth of familiarity of IHE staff with the local school situation and is helpful in determining levels of expertise among IHE staff members. This in itself holds promise as one consideration for better balance of IHE staff persons to replace faculty or staff IHE staff members who retire or move.

Summary. Although the PREPS model has been in use for some years, it is still viewed as a tentative working model. Diffusion theorists contend that any model used to bring about change or reform must be judged for

adequacy against certain criteria. These criteria are:

1. A model should be practical. PREPS has undergone revision to achieve practicality; its activities have evolved or changed, but its basic mission and governance structure have not undergone radical change.

2. Components of a model should be manipulable. Component flexibility for any model assures its adaptation to differing school situations, curricular programs, types of school districts, and administrative styles.

3. Economy of use is necessary. The consortium concept permits use and application of high-powered research and evaluation methodologies at low-cost to each member school district. Sharing a central cadre of qualified experts among all member schools is a major economic factor.

4. Model components must be easily communicated. Astuteness of staff members both at the IHE and at the local school level permits the most complex of concepts to be interpreted, transmitted, and placed into the appropriate context. Mutual respect for the expertise and integrity between staff members at all levels is a prerequisite for successful communication.

5. The model should be comprehensive. PREPS was not originally designed to include a staff-development component other than inservicing for research and evaluation skills acquisition. A teaching skills component would, of course, make the PREPS model more comprehensive than it currently is. However, as a model that discovers, identifies, diagnoses, researches, summarizes, interprets, suggests curricular revisions, and leads to change within the parameters of its mission, PREPS is unsurpassed.

6. The model should be synergistic --- it should consider multiple forces and factors working in concert. The PREPS model permits local

school systems to address simultaneously national, regional, and local community issues; e.g., how to address lowered ACT and SAT scores, while simultaneously considering the need for adjustments to meet community economic development, as well as state educational reform requirements.

7. The model should lend itself to intervening in phases. The change process is influenced by innumerable variables which fluctuate in intensity over time. Models that are phase-specific and which have flexibility of application usually have the greatest probability for success. If possible, major educational changes should be introduced when major changes are occurring in the larger society. PREPS is an unusually effective model for intervening at different points to bring about reform.

8. The model should permit differential resource investment in the components. The PREPS model permits varying sizes of school districts, each with a differing administrative structure, to allocate resources (money, time, staff, etc.) to the various model components in a differential manner; e.g., a large school district may allocate different resources in different amounts to the same component compared to resource allocations to the same component of a smaller district.

9. The model should recognize the influences on the rest of the system caused by the change process. Such influences are referred to as the "ripple effect." For example, curricular changes in one grade level may affect the next grade level. Similarly, certain curricular changes for one program resulting from research or evaluation studies may affect the instructional management strategies for several other programs. PREPS permits evaluation of programs that cut across grade levels and studies that cut across disciplines or content lines.

10. The model must be flexible and versatile enough for application to

different organizational structures. Mississippi has at least eight different types of school districts; some districts appoint the superintendents; some elect them. Some districts are very large, but many are very small, enrollment-wise. The PREPS model accommodates all.

11. The model must provide for evaluation, effectiveness, and impact assessment of change. Such measures are included in the PREPS model, although they may not be taken as systematically as needed. But when taken, these measures point to the need for PREPS to expand its activities and/or to change its priorities.

12. The model should recognize the humanness of the participants involved. PREPS recognizes the need for upgrading research and evaluation skills among staff members at local school district offices. Similarly, PREPS recognizes the need for updating the awareness and knowledge levels of IHE staff. Interactional communication is a major emphasis of the PREPS model.

This paper is a brief description of a delivery system that is trying to improve the effectiveness of public schools. The system was initiated from the local school level, with an IHE being asked to help. PREPS, as a type of model, has evolved; it did not "explode on the scene," as it were. It has struggled for survival. It has made fabulous contributions to the betterment of Mississippi schools. It was asked to help design the Education Reform Act of 1982. It was asked to lead in the design of the state's Accountability and Instructional Management (AIM) plan. It has held workshops in research, evaluation, test development, and computer technologies for more than 1,000 teachers and other school personnel. It has raised the visibility level of research and evaluation strategies in the state. It has brought the IHE into closer contact with public schools.

It has done all these things efficiently and effectively. Hence, most any IHE with a desire to be of greater service to public education would jump at the chance to join a consortium like PREPS. By participating in PREPS, our IHE has been better able to keep up with changes that occur in schools and the issues they face. Similarly, by maintaining an up-to-date awareness of school problems, we have been better able to articulate and substantiate the need for changes in the teacher education strategies that comprise the curriculum of the MSU/COE. Interaction with the schools allows the IHE to keep up with the details of administrative rules and regulations that reach the local school from state, regional, and national levels. As the schools have become more adept at being accountable, so has the IHE. Such school-IHE interaction has resulted in the design of more efficient networks for information exchange. Identifying more accurately the needs for inservicing and staff development for school personnel has been a by-product of this interaction. Accurate assessment of such needs will aid the MSU/COE in developing assistance to meet teacher certification, teacher evaluation, and school accreditation issues which are parts of the Education Reform Act of 1982.

In conclusion, the MSU/COE joined the consortium at its inception because PREPS represented an innovative alternative at a time when a new vision was essential. The focus of PREPS was directed toward a special group of rural and/or small schools in a relatively rural and unindustrialized state which had been all but forgotten or ignored by existing programs and policies that were then, and still are, being concentrated on urban and inner-city school problems. When an assessment is made of PREPS impact, it will reveal substantive results that will support much of what is contained in diffusion theory and the underlying constructs of organization development for renewal.